



STEPPING UP TO THE PLATE

School Wellness Policy: Community Connections

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Community collaboration can improve the wellness of students and community members alike.

The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 (Public Law 108-265: Section 204) provides an ideal opportunity to stimulate the development of local policies that serve students and communities. It requires each school district participating in the National School Lunch Program to adopt a local wellness policy that addresses healthy eating and physical activity. This article explores promising school-community interactions that could become an integral part of these wellness policies. The education of children is crucial to the development of future citizens, and it gains effectiveness when it is linked with the community.

The School Nutrition Association (2006) has examined the policies that were adopted by the United States' 100 largest school districts (which educate 23% of American students) in response to this legislative mandate. Of these 100 districts, 94 percent had adopted policies as of August 7, 2006. The findings also showed that recess is a requirement for elementary schools in more than 50 percent of the districts and that 78 percent require physical activity for at least some grade levels. In addition, the policies emphasize adhering to state physical education requirements, including school athletic activities as part the curriculum, incorporating physical activity into classroom activities, facilitating professional development for physical educators, and making athletic facilities available to the community after school hours. Although only 19 percent of the schools made staff wellness a part of their policies, more than 90 percent outlined a plan for implementation and evaluation that included participation by the superintendent, the school nutrition director, or a wellness policy task force.

Physical education specialists have always played a multitude of roles, and the recent wellness legislation further increases their scope of responsibilities. Besides developing "physically educated students" who demonstrate competency in a variety of motor skills, are physically fit, and exhibit personal and social responsibility (National Association for Sport and Physical Education [NASPE], 2004b), the physical educator is now encouraged to maximize physical activity time during class, provide additional physical activity opportunities before and after school, and promote physical activity at home and in the community. For some, these new responsibilities might seem daunting. For others, particularly those who have felt marginalized or isolated, the new legislation offers an opportunity to serve in a leadership position within the school and community.

Research indicates that children who exhibit favorable attitudes toward being physically active within their community also display healthier behaviors (Rutten, Ziemainz, Abu-Omar, & Groth, 2003). Other studies reveal that time spent outdoors, access to facilities, and involvement in youth sport programs are related to higher



Making use of community facilities, such as a miniature golf course (left) or a bowling alley (right), for physical education class expands students' awareness of lifelong physical activities.

physical activity levels (Sallis, Prochaska, & Taylor, 2000). These findings suggest that students should be made aware of physical activity opportunities outside of the physical education setting.

This article discusses the role that physical education teachers play in promoting community connections in relation to physical activity. Four main approaches will be explored: (1) promoting appropriate practices in the community, (2) connecting students with activity opportunities, (3) inviting members of the community into the school, and (4) promoting appropriate use of school facilities for community activity.

Appropriate Practices in the Community

The physical educator can bring together physical education and the community by serving as a resource for coaches and leaders of community youth sport and activity programs. Youth programs are often led by volunteer coaches who want to help kids but have a limited background in coaching. Children's learning will be limited if they have to stand in long lines waiting for a turn or are not given ample opportunities to practice. When coaches engage in negative practices such as intimidation, children may be inclined to drop out of sport. Appropriate standards for youth sport programming are available, and physical educators can assume a leadership role by joining with community organizations (e.g., parks and recreation) to share physical activity standards and train coaches to follow appropriate pedagogical practices (Centers

for Disease Control and Prevention, 1997). For example, the Rhea County Tennessee School District's Wellness Policy includes the goal of system-wide training for coaches (Rhea County School District, 2006).

Using information from the National Council for the Accreditation of Coaching Education (NCACE) and the American Sport Education Program (ASEP), physical educators can encourage coaches to seek certification. Other reputable sources for acquiring information about appropriate pedagogy in children's movement programs include the *Appropriate Practices* documents for elementary, middle, and high school physical education (NASPE, 2000, 2001, 2004a), which were written for physical educators, administrators, policymakers, and parents. The physical education teacher can introduce these documents to parents on parent-teacher nights, can highlight important points from the documents in school newsletters, and can suggest that directors of youth sport leagues and park and recreation centers order these documents as mandatory reading for their coaches. Ultimately, students and parents can then hold programs accountable for the use of "best practices."

Physical Activity Opportunities in the Community

Many school wellness policies have the goal of increasing students' awareness of wellness opportunities in their community. In order to accomplish this goal, the physical education teacher, with assistance from students, parents, and others, can collect and disseminate information about a

wide range of physical activity programs available to people in the community. Schools and physical educators should have information available about opportunities that are available in the community and nearby neighborhoods, such as dance, martial arts, Capoeira lessons, skate-boarding parks, or ice-skating rinks.

At least one state has formalized the link with community physical activity. In South Carolina, high school physical education requires each student to participate in some type of physical activity in the community (Rink & Mitchell, 2003). Students must contact the organization, collect information, participate, and keep a log of their engagement in physical activity. Over a period of several semesters, teachers can expand the set of resources with the materials collected by students and share it with other students, parents, school faculty and staff, and community members.

Another means of informing elementary students about opportunities within the community is to assign a homework project that requires them to locate every physical activity support within a five-minute walk from their home. As parents assist in completing this assignment, they too will increase their awareness of the opportunities. Include a checklist of items that support engagement in physical activity (e.g., siblings, bicycle, pet dog, parks, basketball court, sidewalks, trails). Many students have access to these items but may not associate them with physical activity or realize how many physical activity supports are available nearby.

Inviting the Community into the School

As the physical educator builds relationships with key players in community activity programs, he or she will become more aware of the number of people who are available to assist in the promotion of physical activity. These individuals can be invited to the school to discuss different opportunities with students, staff, and parents. Students and parents sometimes feel more comfortable accessing community resources when they know the face of the organizer. In fact, community physical activity leaders can even provide an occasional demonstration or sample lesson that eventually becomes a standard part of the curriculum.

Bringing community members to the school campus can also build support for physical education. Wellness fairs, for instance, encourage medical and health professionals in the community to visit the school. This can increase awareness about the relationship between physical activity and good health, and it also showcases physical education as a part of the health professions. Physical activity fairs are similar to health fairs, but they provide samples of different types of physical activity and can highlight health and wellness issues (e.g., blood pressure screening).

A key in locating good role models is to find regular people with regular jobs who have found an activity they love and

are willing to share their experiences with children. The following strategies may be useful in locating community members who are willing to help:

- Visit neighborhood association meetings and invite those with expertise to come share their knowledge with your classes. This provides students with knowledge about neighborhood opportunities while concurrently providing community leaders with knowledge about effective physical education.

• Survey students about their parents' expertise and physical activity interests. Some parents may own their own studio or be devoted sport participants. Others may have played on a professional team or coached at a high level.

- Call local service clubs (Rotary, Optimist, Lions, etc.).
- Check with the local fire station for fire fighters who have unique interests. Due to their long shifts, they often are free during the day to visit schools.

• Contact community leaders. Think about how powerful it would be to have the mayor or head of the chamber of commerce get connected with your program as a physical activity advocate.

Coordinating a community member's visit to classes takes some preparation, but it can help to make the experience more meaningful for students. First, educate students about who is coming and share a little about the person's activity or interest so students are prepared to ask appropriate questions. Second, choose a couple of polite, gregarious students to act as hosts or hostesses to the visitors. Third, ask a group of students to volunteer to write a thank-you note after the visit. This goes a long way toward ensuring a positive experience, and the students will feel more connected as will the visiting community member.

In addition to traditional health fairs, there are numerous ways to bring people on campus. For example, partnering with a service organization to hold a community-wide "fun run" helps community members to connect with the school and highlights the school as part of the community. "Family Fun" nights are another way to involve students and their parents and siblings in physical activity at the school. These events get families active and serve to educate parents and community members about the importance of physical activity. Through collaboration with teachers in other content areas, middle and high school students can research appropriate activities for the event, create advertisements, and invite community members to attend.

It is also important that colleagues be informed of the value of promoting youth physical activity. Fellow teachers and administrators are not always aware of current mandates and health issues. Inviting other teachers, administrators, and support staff to visit the gymnasium will help to promote the significance of the physical education program. By convincing colleagues to support the philosophy of community

collaboration, you may find individuals who are willing to assist by advertising for events, securing volunteers, and recruiting participants.

Use of School Facilities for Community Physical Activity

Another approach related to school and community wellness is to use school facilities for community activities. Traditionally, physical education teachers get frustrated when after-school groups use the facilities and do not leave them as they found them. The teachers return to find equipment in disarray, posters torn, and worse. As a result, they have been hesitant to allow others access to the gym. These are very real and serious concerns, but in order to promote community support for schools and physical education programs, new strategies for sharing space are needed. When outside groups use the facility, clear standards for the use and care of the facility should be established, and a deposit system can be employed to encourage accountability. Teachers can stow valuable items (e.g., CD players, sound systems) to discourage use, and a modest user fee can help support the cost of storage facilities. Communicate with the administration to determine what equipment can be shared and to set standards for the use and care of equipment. Such measures can reduce frustration and present a united front to community members.

There are several benefits to allowing community groups in the gymnasium. Students, for example, encounter adults who choose to participate in a variety of activities. Bringing activities into the schools also provides more options for faculty, staff, and students to join physical activity groups. In fact, the physical education specialist can coordinate free or inexpensive activities such as social dance instruction in the gymnasium one night per week. This allows students, parents, staff, and community members to convene for physical activity opportunities in an environment that is safe and well supervised. A proactive approach to encouraging the use of school facilities can prove advantageous for the entire physical education program.

Just as a successful social studies unit can produce an informed voter, a mark of a successful physical education program is the development of an active individual who chooses to take care of his or her body. The number of students participating in community physical activity programs promoted through their physical education program is an excellent marker for program effectiveness. When a significant number of school graduates play on teams in recreation leagues, take lessons, or use the local recreation or fitness center, it becomes evident that the physical educator assumed an active role in educating students about community opportunities. Participation in the community is also a way that students meet the third national standard, to participate regularly in physical activity (NASPE, 2004b).

Isn't the mark of a quality physical education program highlighted when graduates meet the established physical activity recommendations? Moreover, isn't success achieved

when students value physical activity for purposes of health, enjoyment, challenge, self-expression, and social interaction (NASPE, 2004b)?

Summary

The physical educator's job now reaches well beyond teaching students to move well and be fit. It has expanded to include guiding youths in the process of becoming physically active for life. The authors have offered various suggestions for establishing community connections, but the possibilities are endless. In today's world, the physical education teacher recognizes that children need physical activity opportunities beyond physical education. Thus, physical educators should accept the responsibility to connect students to a wide variety of community offerings that will facilitate their engagement in physical activity throughout life.

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